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Opinion Work & Careers

How workers can profit by taking control of technology

Instead of earning paltry fees why not build, run and own apps themselves?

MARGARET HEFFERNAN

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When friends ask me why I do not use Uber, the answer is simple: I do not want to send my money off to Sili Valley. Taxis have historically been a vital ingredient in any local economy and I would rather support the people in my community. Ordering a car via an app means the profits leave town. But when I ran high-tech companies at the turn of the millennium, much of the optimism that surrounded the internet came from the idea that, as a shared computing network, it would spread opportunity among the many not the few. Romantic perhaps, but I was not alone. Of course it has not turned out that way. The so-called sharing economy has not shared anything. Rather it has aggregated valuable consumer data, concentrating advantage in a few well-funded behemoths. Trebor Scholz, associate professor of culture and media at the New School in New York, warned in 2014 that workers and consumers alike were losing control of the technology they use to buy and sell goods and services. Why, he wondered, should drivers and other freelancers not use technology to collaborate, and compete with the behemoths? Instead of earning paltry fees from casual labour or zero-hours contracts that make the investors rich, why not

build, run and own apps themselves? What Prof Scholz proposed was platform co-operativism: a mash-up of 19th century co-operative principles with 21st century technology. Writing in his 2016 book, *Uberworked and Underpaid*, he evangelised the perfect marriage of collaborative technology with co-operative businesses. The first examples in 2015 proved the point. Cotabo (Bologna, Italy); ATX Co-op Taxi (Texas); Green Taxi Cooperative (Colorado); The People's Ride (Michigan) and Yellow Cab Cooperative (California) each built and now run their own taxi apps that bring work to drivers who own the company and share the proceeds. Other platforms followed, such as Stocksy, a stock photo website owned and curated by photographers disenchanted with traditional syndicators. Loconomics provides local platforms for freelance therapists, carers and cleaners who keep 100 per cent of fees. Resonate is a streaming service owned by musicians. Read more [Twitter as a co-op?](#) It is a dream that is worthy of consideration. Alternative models are far from discredited — just look at Wikipedia and Mozilla. Some take co-operation and collaboration further. On the grounds that duplicating platforms is expensive, Fairmondo, first in Germany and more recently in the UK, aggregates buyers and sellers focused on making and selling ethical goods — but the software they use is free for others to adopt, amend and use for themselves. Tricky, human aspects of setting up co-ops are addressed for free online with samples: bylaws, boilerplate contracts and legal advice. Recognising that consumers can be exploited much as workers, some platform co-ops encourage customers to participate. In Boston, the engineers at Agaric are developing a co-operative web-hosting business whose customers will be able to vote on which new features they want developed. Instead of increased prices for capabilities they do not need, consumers get the functionality they value. Bolder still is MiData, a

“health data co-operative” that hosts member-users’ medical records and integrates them with data streams from FitBit devices and personal genetic profiles. It hopes to compete with commercial data brokers by returning the control and monetisation of personal data to those who generate it. At the heart of platform co-operatives lie three principles: communal ownership, democratic governance and transparent data. What they offer, says Prof Scholz, is an optimistic vision for the future of work: transactions in which no participant is powerless. How far can this go? Next month, Twitter shareholders will vote on whether or not to turn the social media network into a co-op. What started as a joke now promises, according to the annual meeting’s agenda, to “realise Twitter’s potential value, which the current business model has struggled to do for many years. We could set more transparent accountable rules for handling abuse. We could reopen the platform’s data to spur innovation.” Jack Dorsey, founder and part-time CEO, is not keen. When it comes to co-ops, traditional business people can be cynical. They forget that Ocean Spray, one of the venerable US drinks brands, is a multibillion-dollar co-op. They may be unfamiliar with Mondragon, the network of Spanish co-operatives that proved robust in the economic crisis. And few have read Elinor Ostrom, the Nobel Prize-winning economist who analysed how and why local co-operatives prove successful where larger corporations fail. But against the relentless drum roll of technological fatalism, it is refreshing to hear a different tune emerging: the high-pitched harmony of human beings refusing to surrender.

The writer is an entrepreneur, consultant and author of ‘Wilful Blindness’

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